



Fort Carson-MEDDAC News

Supplements and Medication: not always a safe combination

By: Maj. Trisha Stavinocha, Chief, Performance Nutrition Services, Evans Army Community Hospital

Do you take any dietary supplements? Chances are, yes. A survey conducted in 2007-2008 reported about 50 percent of our Active Duty population takes a dietary supplement of some sort at least once a week. Adults over 65 years old are the largest consumer of prescription medications and roughly 30 percent take a dietary supplement. Supplements range from pills, powders, teas, and other liquids. They can include vitamins, minerals, herbs or other botanicals, amino acids, enzymes, organ tissues, glandulars, and metabolites.

Most people don't realize there are more than 55,000 supplement products available and each can contain 50 ingredients or more. Unfortunately, many people take dietary supplements without knowing what ingredients they contain. They also may not realize these ingredients could interact with their medications. According to the Natural Medicines Database, there are more than 1,600 potential interactions between medications and supplements. For example, anticoagulants such as Coumadin have 190+ interactions while antidepressants such as Prozac or Zoloft have 60+ interactions.

Many people try to "complement" their medication by adding a supplement. The fact is that medications work very well by themselves. Speak with your physician or pharmacist before taking a supplement. Without more information, you may cause an unintentional overdose or render the drug ineffective.

Below are examples of supplements people frequently use in combination with prescription medications, believing it will help them. Avoid these combinations! If you have one of the health conditions the supplement or medication described is intended to treat, talk to your doctor or pharmacist before self treating.

- Melatonin and sleep aids
- St. John's Wort and antidepressants
- Fish Oil and blood pressure lowering medications
- Cinnamon and diabetes medications
- Red Yeast Rice and cholesterol lowering medications
- Arginine and erectile dysfunction medications

There are three main types of interactions a supplement could have with a drug.



First, the dietary supplement could cause the drug to work too well. For example, taking a medication to lower blood pressure plus a supplement that lowers blood pressure could cause your blood pressure to drop to dangerously low levels. You could experience dizziness, seizures, lightheadedness or pass out.

Second, the dietary supplement could cause the drug not to work. More than 78 different dietary supplement ingredients turn on an enzyme system that causes drugs to pass through your body and not work at all. This is the case with St. John's Wort and birth control.

Third, the dietary supplement in combination with the medication could cause kidney or liver toxicity. Both of these organs help your body dispose of foreign substances, including supplements, medications, and alcohol.

Finally, it's also important to remember that dietary supplements can have multiple names. Bitter Orange, a potentially dangerous stimulant in many dietary supplements, has more than 20 different names. Kava, another potentially dangerous dietary supplement ingredient, can cause liver toxicity and goes by more than 20 different names.

If you do decide to use a dietary supplement, remember a few things.

Avoid any dietary supplement with more than 20 ingredients. Most plain multivitamins have fewer than 20 ingredients. Most "mega" multivitamins have multiple pills and well over 20 ingredients.

Be leery of supplements and blends that don't reveal their ingredients. Often, this is a way to conceal harmful substances and a blend won't tell you an exact amount.

Don't take something just because you heard about it on television or read about it on the internet. Usually supplement manufacturers or TV show hosts only give you 10 percent of the story behind the supplement.

Most importantly, review all your dietary supplements and medications with your pharmacist, dietitian, and provider.